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# British Sport and British Society in the Twentieth Century*

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In the summer of 1908 the fourth modern celebration of the Olympic Games was held in London. It was by far the largest and most spectacular up to that time. 22 countries sent over 2,000 competitors. A new stadium was opened in West London and visiting dignitaries and the presence of members of the British Royal Family added to the importance of the event. It seemed appropriate that the Games should be in London, not just because the British Empire was the most powerful in the world at that time but also because it was the example of the British public (private) schools and the role of games in their curriculum which, together with Ancient Greece, had inspired the French Baron de Coubertin to invent the modern Olympics. His motives, of course, were not entirely pure. He saw the public schools as providing the dynamic leadership which had been important in Britain's growth as an imperial power. He hoped France might benefit from a similar educational programme which in turn would strengthen the resolve of the French people to stand up to the new German state and recover territory lost to it after the war of 1870. In 1908, Britain was the first sporting nation as well as the first industrial nation. Certainly important sections of British opinion thought so although there was some competition from the United States: the rivalry between the two spilled over into controversy as several moments during the 1908 Olympics. It was to be the last occasion when the host country provided all the judges and officials. But in 1908 the British appeared to be the number one sporting nation. When it was decided that the Marathon would begin at Windsor Castle and end opposite the Royal Box inside the Stadium there was no difficulty even though this made the distance 26 miles and 385 yards instead of the 24 miles 1,504 yards (40 km) which was normally run.

Sport was certainly an important part of the British way of life by 1908. It played an important in several of Britain's key institutions including the army, the churches and the schools. Its spectacular side was a modest, but flourishing commercial sector whose leading sports events punctuated the year, reflected the seasons and contributed to the formation of a national culture cutting across lines of class, education and generation. Spring, for example, saw the steeple-chasing season (horses racing round a course over fences), reach its climax with

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the Grand National. Spring also saw the Oxford and Cambridge Boat Race and the climax to the professional football season with the League Championship decided in both England and Scotland and the knock-out Cup competitions in both countries also reaching the final match. In 1908 Manchester United won the First Division championship. In Scotland, Glasgow Celtic won both Cup and championship (they certainly won't do it this year!). Football was the most popular of Britain's modern sports and professional League Football its most spectacular expression. The League was an urban phenomenon : only 5 out of the 38 cities in England and Scotland with populations in excess of 100,000 were without a professional League club in 1908. Every Saturday afternoon between September and April, and on public holidays such as Christmas and Easter, professional football matches regularly attracted bigger crowds than any public events other than Coronations or royal visits. In England Cup Final day was an important national occasion. It was the climax of a tournament entered by 400 clubs. Although two of the leading professional teams usually reached the final, along the way the English could indulge themselves in affection for the underdog by welcoming the occasional defeats which small clubs inflicted on the mighty. The Cup Final took place in London, at Crystal Palace before 1914, at the new Wembley Stadium from 1923. 74,967 saw the final of 1908 between Wolverhampton Wanderers and Newcastle United. Supporters of both clubs and others interested in football would travel up to London from the North and the Midlands for the match. It was a day out for the clerks and respectable working men who made up the bulk of football supporters. It was a trip to the capital city of the British Empire. It became so popular an occasion that from 1924 only 92,000 ticket holders were admitted : and demand always far exceeded supply.

It could be argued that it was summer which saw British Sport in the brightest light. It was at that time that sport overlapped with and became part of the London social 'season'—the moment in the year—from May to July—when the aristocratic and fashionable descended on London for a round of visits, parties, balls and sporting events and when the daughters of the rich came out into the marriage market. Great race meetings such as Epsom, with its Derby and Oaks, and Royal Ascot : rowing at Henley Regatta : the cricket match between the two leading private schools, Eton and Harrow, which attracted large crowds of upper class spectators—all were important moments in the calender of the leisured class. Of these events only the Derby was really shared by members of all classes. Scores of thousands would gather on the Epsom Downs to see the country's most famous horse race. The notion that sport could be an experience shared by the highest and lowest in the land was never better captured than when King Edward VII led in his horse Minoru, after victory in the Derby of 1909.

The summer was also for athletics, golf, bowls, swimming and tennis, but in many respects crickest was *the* summer game especially in England. Cricket was played at every level from the street to Lords, the cricket ground that was the headquarters of the club who ran the game, the MCC. During the summer the newspapers gave over a lot of their sporting space to detailed reports of the fifteen team county championship and the Test matches between England and visitors from the Empire such as Australia and South Africa. Cricket appeared

to many sporting Englishmen to be the apex of sporting achievement. It seemed peculiarly British—English, partly because nowhere else had it been embraced with such enthusiasm but partly because of its form. It was a game not just between men but against nature where ground and weather conditions could affect the result: it was a game of show rhythms —although it could be and was played on Saturday afternoons and summer evening, three seven hour days were allowed for the top matches; it was a game in which style and how it was played often appeared to be as important as the result. The phrase 'it's not cricket' had come to epitomise the idea of fair play and fair dealing.

But as the holding of the Olympic Games in London in that summer of 1908 had illustrated, sport was not merely a national but an international phenomenon with Britain close to its core. No overseas cricket team visited England in 1908 but England had themselves been playing —not very successfully—in Australia in the winter of 1907-8 and in spite of the vast distances involved and the length of time it took to travel there by steamship there had been many similar tours both to and from England since the first cricket team had gone to America in 1859. Test matches between England and Australia were already one of the most celebrated occasions in the sporting calendar. Such sporting contacts not only maintained the Imperial connection: they also contributed to the growth of Australian identity and confidence.

Nor was it only cricket which was international. Football had been since 1872 when England first played Scotland. As sport wasn't one thing neither was Britain one country, but four—England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland. England was by far the biggest and most powerful but the other nationalities had clear identities which sport reinforced. International championships in football and rugby had been played for since the 1880s and in football the annual meeting of England and Scotland was one of *the* matches of the season. When it was played in England thousands of Scots travelled south to support the team, 6,000 in 1903, for example, which had grown to 15,000 by the 1930s and over 20,000 after the Second World War. At rugby the great rivalry was between England and Wales and that match and others such as the one in 1905 when Wales beat the previously undefeated New Zealanders helped to foster and consolidate notions of what it meant to be Welsh. As we have seen, Anglo-American sporting rivalry was already well developed on the athletics track, in the boxing ring, on the golf course, on the sea, even on the tennis court where the Davis Cup had already begun. And every so often the Americans twisted the lion's tail by sending over a baseball team in an attempt to convert the heathen British to the American national game (they failed).

Sport followed trade. British engineers, managers, missionaries, teachers, businessmen, clerks and workers took their love of sport almost everywhere they went. Moreover individual British sportsmen and British teams regularly went abroad. In May 1908 for example, Manchester United were touring Austria and Hungary and other footballers were visiting Denmark, France and Germany. England beat France at rugby in Paris and an Australian rugby team arrived in Britain in September 1908. Tennis already had something of a European circuit with championships at Wimbledon, Paris and Monte Carlo.

The spread of sports to Europe and further afield at this time was also part of a wider

enthusiasm for things British, reflecting the prestige and power of the country and her Empire.

Sport as an international phenomenon grew faster still after the 1914-18 war. In all sports the number of competing countries doubled between 1900 and the 1920s and doubled again between the 1920s and the 1950s. Simultaneously, sport was becoming more nationalistic and more international. This growth of sport created problems for a country like Britain which saw itself not only as a pioneer in many different sports but in a sense the inventor and owner of modern sports. British sportsmen were pleased that foreigners should take up what many saw as 'their' games: and many British sportsmen enjoyed the overseas friendships which international sport promoted, but when overseas players and administrators wanted a share of control then difficulties sometimes followed. The British seemed to expect more than respect for British traditions and experience. In football for example, the British International Board decided what the laws of the game should be and defined what constituted a true amateur. But the growth of the game in Europe produced the need for a wider controlling organisation and a number of European countries established FIFA in 1904. Britain joined with reluctance and after insisting that all four home countries should have separate representation—this was the realpolitik of sport—left and rejoined twice. The first time, after the 1914-18 war, was because the British did not wish to play football against the former enemy countries of Austria and Germany. The second occasion, in 1928, followed a disagreement over what constituted a true amateur but was also connected with British fears of losing their autonomy. This last withdrawal lasted nearly twenty years and meant that none of the four home nations entered any of the first three World Cups (when England and Scotland would have been among the strongest teams).

The expansion of international sport also meant that the British reputation for tolerance and fair play was put under a severe test. More competition quite quickly meant less easy superiority and more British defeats. Anxieties about the lack of British success and the blow which such failures administered to pride and prestige first came to a head after the Stockholm Olympics of 1912. It was bad enough that the Americans should do so well, but to lose to Europeans as well was too much. The suggestion—in athletics—was that better facilities must be provided and coaching and training taken more seriously (at the Americans were doing in fact). A national coach was appointed but the war prevented him from starting work. It was 1947 before the first national coach took up his duties.

After the First World War the reputation of sport in Britain was very high. Sport had helped win the war. Fair play and games had triumphed over German discipline and gymnastics. In the immediate post—war enthusiasm for reconstruction some members of the sports lobby felt this position should be consolidated. They called for the State to provide more resources for sport. But the depression swooped down on the British economy and nothing was done although local government cautiously began to expand its provision of sports facilities.

Sport in Britain remained an essentially voluntary activity. It was something that people organised for themselves. It was more or less democratic—I say more or less because there

was nothing democratic about the Jockey Club, which ran flat racing, the MCC (cricket) nor the Royal and Ancient (golf). These were exclusive, aristocratic bodies with origins in the eighteenth century. But those 'new' sports which took organisational wing in the third quarter of the nineteenth century were more middle class in origin and more democratic in structure. Football, swimming, bowls, athletics, cycling, hockey, amateur boxing, gymnastics, lawn tennis —these were all run by Associations and elected, unpaid officers. But this did not mean that popular participation in sport was at a high level. Take sport in schools, for instance. It is well known that a commitment to sport was a defining characteristic of the British public school and that this was imitated by the grammar schools. But for the large majority of children who left school at the age of 14 there was no access to secondary education. Sport could be part of the curriculum in elementary schools from 1906 but it was often a hit and miss affair and depended on the enthusiasm of individual teachers. Nor was it any better for those in the immediate post-school years. The poverty of many denied opportunity and shortage of playing space in the cities was a serious problem. The National Playing Fields Association was an attempt by important people to provide more opportunities for play. Their survey of 94 towns and 31 counties in 1924 provides an indication of the extent of the problem with only one public football ground per 8,000 people, 1 bowling green per 13,000. Indeed cynics argued that most people's contact with sport was through betting on it—horse racing in particular attracted large numbers of people and from the 1920s Greyhound racing and the 1930s Football Pools added to the opportunities to bet on sport. By 1948 about half of the total population of working class men did the Pools and 50% of all men over the age of 21. Even 20% of women filled them in every week during the football season.

Of course, if popular participation in sport among men was relatively low, among women it was lower still. Sport was largely a male world in which women had to struggle to establish themselves. There had been long arguments among doctors and educationalists about how far strenuous physical activity was appropriate for women. Even among those in favour of some sport for women there was disagreement about whas was truly feminine. There was also anxiety in some quarters about women performing *any* physical activity in public. Sport for women in Britain was not unsurprisingly pioneered by the educated middle class minority in the public and grammar schools and in the colleges and universities. By the 1920s women were playing bowls, croquet, cricket, golf, hockey, netball, tennis, lacrosse and swimming. They were also engaged in track and field which were introduced for women into the Olympics for the first time in 1928 but only in five events—100 metres, 800 metres, 400 metre hurdles, discus and high jump—British women organised by the Women's Amateur Athletic Association said it wasn't enough and refused to go. About 20,000 British women were competing regularly in athletics by the 1930s.

There is no question that women's interest in exercise and physical fitness was growing rapidly in these years. The Keep Fit Movement seems to have started among groups of women in the north of England in 1929. Groups were soon a feature of many towns. But an even more dramatic development was the growth of the Women's League of Health and

Beauty, a self-supporting commercial enterprise founded in 1930 by Mollie Stack. For six pence a week women could join a branch and take part in a programme of physical exercises. It was regular, standardised movement to familiar popular music. It was designed to improve health but it was also fun and the League gave national demonstrations of their work at the Albert Hall in London through the 1930s and performed at the Festival of Britain in 1951. It may not have really been sport but it performed many of the same functions. It provided a place to go to meet other women, to make friends, to keep fit and to perform at the same time. It was aimed mainly at business girls and busy women and by the end of the 1930s had 170,000 members. This was at a time when scarcely 1 in 1,000 women played any sport after the age of 20.

But, if British sport remained largely a voluntary activity the growth of international competition, the space given to sport in the newspapers and by the 1930s, on the radio, its identification with national pride and prestige began to drag a somewhat reluctant British state into the sporting arena. The Foreign Office was pleased to reply to queries from overseas about the nature and structure of British sport. They were less enthusiastic about reports of the conflicts and scrapes into which British sportsmen sometimes found themselves involved in abroad. The rise of the fascist governments in Italy and Germany brought sport much more directly into the political world. Fascism was obsessed with the physical and made no bones about the need for a physically fit nation in order to fight wars. In both Italy and Germany, sport became the business of the State, sporting success was used as propaganda to reflect the success of the regime. The England-Germany football match in 1935 became swathed in political controversy with British trade union leaders wanting it banned as a protest against the treatment of trade unionists and ethnic minorities in Germany. Protests were also organised against British participation in the Berlin Olympics of 1936. The British Conservative government maintained that sport had nothing to do with politics. But that did not stop them from exerting pressure on the British Olympic Association in 1936, and 1938-9 in order that they should support Tokyo as the venue for the 1940 Olympic Games. There was opposition on the International Olympic Committee because Japan was at war with China. Britain did not wish to further alienate Japan in the deteriorating international situation. Nor did the claim that sport was apart from politics stop the Foreign Office rejoicing over the victory of the England football team in Berlin in 1938. The wider context to all this was the first tentative moves towards official cultural propaganda—the feeling that positive images of Britain abroad could or should be promoted by Government. In 1930 the Treasury granted £2,500 annually to support books, films, lectures but did not yet include sport. The British Council was a small miscellaneous section which would enable those on the ground in foreign countries to support other aspects of British culture.

The British government was impressed by the apparent physical fitness of the German people. At the same time there was a good deal of anxiety about the physical state of the British after two decades of unemployment. The British Medical Association had a physical education committee which produced a disturbing report in 1936. Not only were facilities

inadequate : 79% of the population between the ages of 14 and 40 did not participate in regular weekly physical recreation. The pressure was on Government to do something. Their response was the National Physical Training and Recreation Act of 1937 which set up a body called the National Fitness Council. Local sports centres, a national college of physical education, grants to sports organisations for facilities and coaches—all these were in the pipeline when the Second World War came.

So, it could be argued that although the average Englishman, Welshman, Irishman or Scotsman read about sport, wrote about it and watched it and even wished to be thought by other people to play it, he and even more so, she, actually did not. As one of the leading authorities on physical education in Britain, Peter McIntosh, wrote in 1961, by the time the Olympic Games came to London a second time in 1948, opportunities to participate in many sports were virtually denided to the large majority of young people and opportunities for training and the pursuit of skill to a high level meagre unless they became professionals. Yet as we have seen, it was during the period from about 1880 to 1950 that the idea of the games-playing Englishmen grew up abroad and was the object of envy and emulation. The gentleman-amateur gave rise in Britain to distinctive features of British sports-separate sports, separately governed, strong roots for team games in the schools, a vigorous tradition of voluntary help and unpaid officials and an ethos in which taking part was more important than winning.

In the last thirty years, the image and status of sport in Britain has undergone a dramatic change. I want to spend the rest of the lecture exploring aspects of that change : the growth of state intervention, the increasing role of business in sport and the change in the meaning that British sport has come to have both inside and outside the country.

In 1948 the Olympics returned to London. It was partly a political decision. In part it was a recognition of the British role in the Allied victory in the war : in part an acceptance that outside North America it could not be staged so soon after the war's end, in part an attempt to encourage visits from dollar-spending American visitors. Partly it was a recognition too of Britain's place among the sporting nations. 4,062 competitors, 385 of them women and 499 British took part. It was the beginning of a series of disappointing sporting performances by British competitors which prompted some serious thinking among the sports interest. As we saw earlier, British sport had never really had a single body to speak for it. But since 1935 some of the sports national organisations had come together in the Central Council of Recreative Physical Training. This body had benefited from government grants via the National Fitness Council and changed its name to the Central Council of Physical Recreation in 1944. Two years later it had opened the first national recreation centre. But its most crucial roles were helping with the training of coaches and administrators and articulating the problems facing British sport.

By the 1950s it was clear that Britain was lagging behind many other countries in the provision of facilities for sport. Moreover British performances in international events were undistinguished. At the Helsinki Olympics, for example, only one gold medal was won and

that by a horse. Moreover sport had begun to play an important part in the cold war and the competition between two different socio-economic systems, East and West. The CCPR set up its own committee of inquiry into the state of British sport. It was an important moment when it reported in 1960. It argued powerfully that sport was a significant part of British culture. It suggested that it ought to be part of the welfare system and receive State support. Its proposal of Sports Development Council was eventually implemented by a modernising Labour Government in 1964. This meant government money for sport. But it also meant increasing government interference most graphically illustrated by Prime Minister Thatcher's attempt to boycott the Moscow Olympics in 1980. She exerted a lot of pressure, even offering 50 million of taxpayer's money to resite the Games. Most sporting organisations chose to go to Moscow. Even the Sports Council refused to support the boycott. This said much for the tradition of civil freedom in Britain. But that has not been the end of the political interference with the Sports Council. State aid has boosted facilities and participation though the rich still play more sport than the poor, men more than women and so on.

At the London Olympics of 1948, the British Olympic Association was determined to keep business at bay. No product could be described as 'Olympic'. No donor could use the name or photograph of any competitor in any advertisement nor suggest that any gift made to the team had contributed to victory. All a company could say was that they had supplied items for use at the Olympics. There were still powerful supporters of the amateur principle within British sport. For them sport was not a business though it had its commerical side. They were totally opposed to the idea of a free market. From the 1960s on such people were fighting a rearguard action. There were few gentlemen sportsmen who could afford to play at the highest level without receiving some income. This led to deceit and hypocrisy, to 'shamateurism' where people were paid for doing non-existent jobs in order to maintain their amateur status. The whole system was brought into disrepute. The first great barrier to go was the captaincy of the England cricket team. Always a gentleman amateur, in 1952 the first professional was appointed. The amateur/professional distinction was abolished in cricket ten years later. Wimbledon went open in 1968. The amateur cup in football was ended in 1974. By the 70s track and field athletes had trust funds and by the 80s international rugby players were making a living out of a sport that still called itself amateur and finally turned professional in Sept. 1995. The sponsorship of sports and sports players by business expanded dramatically. Even in 1971 it had reached—25 million—by 1990, it was in excess of-200 million. Sport had almost overnight become a big business, employing 400,000, more than once leading manufacturing industries like cars and chemicals. Much of this growth had been related to television and its coverage, boosted by the coming of colour in 1970. The free market appears to have arrived. Wage restrictions have disappeared along with restriction of players' freedom of movement. Most leading sportsmen have agents like other top entertainers. The after shocks to the British sporting system are still being felt. British sport will never be the same.

So the twentieth century has seen dramatic changes in the structure and context of sport

in Britain. Britain can no longer claim to be the first sporting nation. Sport has become internationalised and increasingly commercialised. One result has been the development of a sameness, an ironing out of national sporting styles—homogenisation. More people than ever paticipate. But as sport attains a higher profile—indeed is treated with a hyperbole in the media usually reserved for sex and violence—the State is more tempted to use it for political purposes. Has all this changed the meanings which sport has for the British? Perhaps this is another excuse for moral superiority? If the British couldn't win, at least they could lose better than anyone else. If there has been a distinctive British contribution it is in the elevation of the ideal of fair play. Its origins are aristocratic. It is concerned with chivalry, honour and style and, some would argue, with the idea of effortless superitority. But sporting ideals of fair play, rational recreation and of course amateurism is only one ingredient. There is another side, of communiry and class identities, professionalism and partisanship. For most of this century the disciples of the former ideology struggled to control the excesses of the latter and the encroaches of business. The decline of sportsmanship on the field and the persistence of crowd violence off it over the last twenty five years are just two indicators of their failure. All appears fair in love, war and sport and yet the British would still like to believe that, in comparison with other peoples, their positive virtues include a relative willingness to applaud an opponent, a relative respect for fair play, and a bias against the big battalions and an admiration for the underdog and still a preference for sporting heroes who are quiet, ordinary, decent types.

In spite of all, sport is still able to capture the imagination of people. Sport is not a consumer good and fans are not customers. It is not only the enjoyment and sociability. Sport provides cultural continuity between generations. It creates emotional bonds between people (and, less happily, hostilities). Great players, great moments, great occasions, as one writer said, 'lie cool and sweet in the memory for ever'.

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